

DOCUMENT RESUME

D 174 974

CS 004 980

AUTHOR Miller, Maurice; And Others
TITLE Readability of Magazines of Interest to Reading-Deficit Students.
PUB DATE [78]
NOTE 11p.; Study prepared at Indiana State University
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS High School Students; *Low Achievers; *Periodicals; *Readability; Readability Formulas; Reading Ability; Reading Difficulty; *Reading Interests; Reading Level; Reading Materials; *Reading Material Selection; *Reading Research; Secondary Education

ABSTRACT

The reading abilities of low achieving high school students at two schools were compared to the readability levels of the magazines in which they showed interest. The median tested reading ability of these students was reported as third/fourth grade by their reading teachers. The reading specialist at one high school reported that boys had an interest in "Sports Illustrated" and motorcycle magazines, and that girls were interested in "True Stories" and modern romance magazines. In a survey conducted at the second school, 89 students listed 88 magazines that focused on cars/motorcycles, hunting/fishing, men's entertainment, fashion, women's interest, general interest/news, humor, teen-adult interest, sports, and teen interest. According to the Fry and Harris-Jacobson readability formulas, only three of the listed magazines had reading levels of seventh grade or below, which would make them suitable for the levels of problem readers. All the other magazines, even those expected to reach teenagers and students with lower reading levels, ranked above eighth grade reading levels. These results show that students with elementary reading skills are interested in popular magazines written above their reading levels, indicating that teachers could capitalize on these interests when developing reading curricula. (RI)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
from the original document. *

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

ED174974

READABILITY OF MAGAZINES OF INTEREST TO READING-DEFICIT STUDENTS

Maurice Miller, Ph. D.

Assistant Professor, Department of Special Education
Indiana State University
Terre Haute, Indiana 47809

Robyn Boyd

Graduate Student, Special Education
Indiana State University
Terre Haute, Indiana 47809

Samuel Trout

Graduate Student, Special Education
Indiana State University
Terre Haute, Indiana 47809

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Maurice Miller, Robyn
Boyd, Samuel Trout

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Readability of Magazines of Interest To Reading-Deficit Students

Some teachers of high school students with reading deficits decry the students' total lack of interest in reading. Other teachers, however, have noticed that these students have out-of-school reading interests even though they have difficulty with in-school reading materials. That is, the high school student who has a tested reading achievement level of third or fourth grade and who, perhaps, is not at all interested in reading in school will pick up a magazine in a local store and attempt to read it. Up to this time, there has been little mention in the professional literature of these students' outside-reading interests or of the difficulty level of what they read. If these students do have outside reading interests, it would be appropriate to see whether the difficulty levels of these reading materials corresponds with their in-school achievement levels. On the other hand, many popular magazines appear, at first glance, to be written for an ability level higher than many of these students possess.

Differences between readability and ability levels have been mentioned in readability studies with the comment that interest and motivation may override the particular grade level of a written passage (Klare, 1976; Maxwell, 1978; Standal, 1978). Lower ability students who display interest may comprehend passages which are above their tested achievement levels (Shnayer, 1969). Although some teachers have identified the outside-reading interests of reading-deficit students, there has been little research reported on this topic other than that by Shnayer (1969) and, possibly, studies reviewed by Klare (1976).

Also, other than the comment by Norvell (1973) that periodical reading interests of lower ability students resembled those of their peers who read adequately, there has been little investigation of which magazines these students are most likely to read. Perhaps this is because students are unwilling to mention their interests to those teachers who may view many such magazines as "trashy," "dirty," or just too difficult. The point here is not to describe the difference between interests of reading-deficit and normal adolescents, but to show that these students do read outside of school.

Some study of the readability of high school materials has been conducted. The study by Janz and Smith (1972) is only one example of numerous studies indicating that content-matter texts are written at higher levels than either grade assignment or the students' actual ability levels. Schlieff and Wood (1974) examined several periodicals and found that readability ratings also tended to overestimate the ability levels of their projected readers. The present writers, however, have been unable to locate any report which identifies the reading interests of high school students and gauges the readability of those selections in comparison with the student's own reading ability.

Schlieff and Wood (1974) point out a notable difficulty with this recommended type of research: the validity of readability formulas, which are usually based on familiar words, sentence length, and word length, may decrease when applied to non-textual materials. Further, there has been considerable discussion questioning the value of any readability-estimating procedure (Guidry and Knight, 1976). Harris (Harris and Sipay, 1975) points out that two variables which have been consistently used in readability

formulas are sentence length and vocabulary. Yet Maxwell (1978) gives examples of nontechnical language that may cause an easily read passage to be rated as difficult, and a passage which contains difficult words or concepts to be rated as fairly easy. A different procedure, developed by Fry (1969), proposes a more easily computed readability rating based on the number of syllables and word length. This popular procedure would seem to override the vocabulary-difficulty problem; yet Kretschmer (1976) notes that some difficult words are quite short, while some easy words are polysyllabic.

Lacking a well-documented technique for computing the readability of off-the-shelf magazines, the authors decided to compare two different readability formulas. The Harris-Jacobson (Harris and Sipay, 1975) formula was picked as an example of a vocabulary-sentence length procedure which has the advantage of being easier to compute than, for instance, the Spache or Dale-Chall formulas. The Fry (1969) procedure was selected as a syllable-sentence length count, primarily because it has been more frequently used than other similar procedures.

Magazines read by low-achieving high school students were identified by two procedures suggested by Klare (1976). In one large high school an unobtrusive measure was simply to ask the reading specialist which magazines had evoked students' interest. At a second high school the reading specialist asked students in special classes to indicate magazines of interest in an informal, field-study, survey. Median tested reading ability of these students in classes at both high schools was reported as third-fourth grade by the reading teachers.

At the first high school the reading teacher reported that boys had interests in Sports Illustrated and motorcycle magazines and the girls were interested in True Stories and modern romance magazines. In the high school where the survey was conducted, results were surprising, and the number of different magazines listed was heartening. Eighty-nine students were surveyed, and eighty-eight magazines were listed at least once. This indicated that students did have an interest in magazines outside of school and revealed quite an array of interest. Fifty-eight boys listed a total of 66 different magazines; thirty-one girls listed 32 different periodicals; and some were listed by both boys and girls. Students were also asked how often they read these magazines, and the total count includes some periodicals in which the students showed only moderate interest. The most frequently listed magazines fell into ten categories: boys listed Cars/Motorcycles, Hunting/Fishing, and Men's Entertainment; girls listed Fashion, and Women's Interest; and both groups listed magazines in the General Interest/News, Humor, Teen-Adult Interest, Sports, and Teen Interest categories. Thus, the survey echoed the observations of the high school teacher yet was more comprehensive. For the present study one or two of the most popular magazines in each of the ten categories were selected. Readability ratings of these magazines are reported in Table I.

Readability ratings reported here should be interpreted with the previously mentioned caution about the possible invalidity of using text-based readability formulas with non-textual material. Readability ratings above the eighth grade level were extrapolated when using the Harris-Jacobson formula; this procedure seemed acceptable since the actual reading level of students was below sixth grade. Although the Fry formula has produced lower ratings than other

formulas in some studies (Guidry and Knight, 1976), this was not found in this study.

According to the Fry and Harris-Jacobson formulas, only three magazines had reading levels of seventh grade or below, making them suitable for the levels of problem readers: Mad, Penthouse, and Tiger Beat. Magazines that might be expected to reach the teenager and the student with lower reading levels, such as Hit Parader and Teen, were found to rank above their reading level, as did all the others.

There was some disparity between the two formulas when applied to magazines. For eight magazines the two formulas produced ratings less than one grade level apart, and, on these, three were equal (counting "college" level): for the remaining magazines, the Fry formula gave a lower grade level rating than the Harris-Jacobson to three. Of the seven magazines whose ratings differed by a grade level or more, the Fry formula rated five magazines higher.

Analysis by category shows that Cars/Motorcycles magazines were within the upper-ninth grade to college reading levels, yet these were some of the most popular magazines. Another popular category among the boys was Men's Entertainment. Here, Playboy was rated at college level by both formulas, but Penthouse was rated at mid-sixth to mid-seventh grade level. Sports Illustrated, a magazine listed as popular with both boys and girls, was rated at beginning eighth or beginning eleventh grade level.

It might be expected that at least some of the differences between the two formulas could be explained by the way popular magazines are written. Some seemed to make a deliberate effort to reach a particular grade level, and some seemed to have no deliberate control of vocabulary or sentence structure.

Large differences among selections were also noted. In popular magazines, very difficult selections are sometimes juxtaposed with very easy passages. Thus, one might expect readability ratings of magazines to differ according to which selections are rated, causing low reliability between ratings.

The readability ratings with these formulas, though, show that popular magazines tend to be written at eighth grade level or above. Several of the more popular magazines were rated as upper-secondary to college level. One may wonder whether this is the result of a deliberate effort on the part of these magazines to reach a particular audience, or whether there is no effort at all to stabilize the magazine's readability level.

Whichever is the case, results of this study reveal that high school students with elementary-level reading skills are interested in, and do read, popular magazines written above their reading levels, indicating that teachers could capitalize on these interests when developing reading curricula.

References

- Fry, Edward. "The Readability Graph." The Reading Teacher, 22 (May 1969), 750.
- Guidry, Lloyd J. and Frances D. Knight. "Comparative Readability: Four Formulas and Newberry Books." Journal of Reading, 19 (April 1976), 552-556.
- Harris, Albert J. and Edward R. Sipay. How to Increase Reading Ability (6th Ed.). New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1975.
- Janz, Margaret L. and Edwin H. Smith. "The Student's Reading Ability and the Readability of Secondary School Subjects." Elementary English, 49 (April 1972), 622-624.
- Klare, George R. "A Second Look At the Validity of Readability Formulas." Journal of Reading Behavior, 8 (1976), 129-152.
- Kretschmer, Joseph C. "Updating the Fry Readability Formula." The Reading Teacher, 30 (March 1976), 555-558.
- Maxwell, Martha. "Readability: Have We Gone Too Far?" Journal of Reading, 20 (March 1978), 525-530.
- Norvell, George W. The Reading Interests of Young People. East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1973.
- Schliel, Mabel and Robert W. Wood. "A Comparison of Procedures to Determine Readability Level of Non-Text Materials." Reading Improvement, 11 (Fall 1974), 57-64.
- Shnayer, Sidney W. "Relationships Between Reading Interest and Reading Comprehension." In J. Allen Figurel (Ed.), Reading and Realism. Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, 1969, 698-702.

(References, Cont.)

Standal, Timothy C. "Readability Formulas: What's Out, What's In?"

The Reading Teacher, 31 (March 1978), 642-646.

Table I. Readability of Magazines of Interest to Reading-Deficit Students

<u>Magazine</u>	<u>Fry Grade Level</u>	<u>Harris-Jacobson Grade Level</u>
1. <u>Cars/Motorcycles</u>		
Car Craft	College	College*
Chopper	9.9	9.9*
Hot Rod	12.8	College*
2. <u>Fashion</u>		
Seventeen	9.5	11.7*
3. <u>General Interest/News</u>		
Ebony	10.4	9.4*
4. <u>Humor</u>		
Mad	6.9**	7.8
5. <u>Hunting/Fishing</u>		
Outdoor Life	8.7	9.5*
6. <u>Men's Entertainment</u>		
Penthouse	7.5	6.4
Playboy	College	College*
7. <u>Sports</u>		
Sports Illustrated	11.1	8.1
8. <u>Teen Interest</u>		
Teen	College	12.5*
Tiger Beat	8.0	7.0
9. <u>Teen-Adult Interest</u>		
High Times	College	12.9*
Hit Parader	10.0	8.7
10. <u>Women's Interest</u>		
True Story	<u>7.9</u>	<u>8.9</u>
Total Means	10.12	9.45

* Extrapolated

** Possibly invalid due to length of sentences